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ABSTRACT

Maurice Sendak, illustrator of over 60 books (including 10 he has written), was interviewed by Virginia Haviland, head of the library of Congress Children's Book Section. Topics discussed in this interview include: Sendak's own reaction to books as a child; the role fantasy plays in the lives of children and adults; the recurring symbol in Sendak's books of ingesting something and then giving it out again; some of the great writers for children; specific elements relevant to the children's book illustrator; the sources of inspiration for Sendak's books; variation of styles used for different books; the changes in children's book publishing since the early 1950s; and the universal appeal of children's books. (JF)

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Questions to an Artist Who is Also an Author

A Conversation between Maurice Sendak and Virginia Haviland

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Questions to an Artist Who is Also an Author

Maurice Sendak began his career as a professional illustrator while he was still a high school student in Brooklyn, N.Y., adapting "Mutt and Jeff" comic strips for publication in comic books. After completing high school he studied at the Art Students League and worked in the design and construction of window displays. His unusual talents soon came to the attention of Ursula Nordstrom, the children's book editor at Harper's, for whom he illustrated Marcel Aymé's *The Wonderful Farm* (1951). He has since illustrated over 60 books, including 10 which he himself has written. His illustrations for Ruth Krauss' *A Hole Is To Dig* (1952) and Else Minarik's *Little Bear* (1959) drew widespread acclaim. As both writer and illustrator, he has produced a number of children's books which have already become classics, including *Kenny's Window* (1956), *Very Far Away* (1957), *The Sign on Rosie's Door* (1960), *The Nutshell Library* (1962), *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), *Higgiety Pigglety Pop!* (1967), and *In the Night Kitchen* (1970). Mr. Sendak was awarded the American Library Association's Randolph Caldecott Medal in 1964 for *Where the Wild Things Are*. In 1970 he became the first American to receive the coveted Illustrator's Medal of the Hans Christian Andersen Awards.

In a National Children's Book Week program sponsored by the Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund, Mr. Sendak presented some of his ideas about children's literature in an informal question-and-answer session at the Library of Congress. The questions were addressed to Mr. Sendak by Miss Virginia Haviland, head of the Library's Children's Book Section. The following article is based on a transcript of the discussion, which was held in the Coolidge Auditorium on November 16, 1970.

From Where the Wild Things Are, *by Maurice Sendak. Harper & Row, Publishers. Copyright © 1963 by Maurice Sendak. Reproduced with permission.*

Illustration by Maurice Sendak from A Hole Is To Dig, *by Ruth Krauss. Harper & Brothers. Illustration copyright 1952 by Maurice Sendak. Reproduced with permission.*

bought the book for me. But the last thing I did with the book was to read it. It was all right. But I think it started then, a passion for books and bookmaking. I wanted to be an illustrator very early in my life; to be involved in books in some way—to make books. And the making of books, and the touching of books—there's so much more to a book than just the reading; there is a sensuousness. I've seen children touch books, fondle books, smell books, and it's all the reason in the world why books should be beautifully produced.

Miss Haviland: *As a starter, let's ask What did a book mean to you as a child? And what kinds of books did you have?*

Mr. Sendak: I think I'll start with the kinds of books, because back in the thirties I didn't have any "official" children's books (I refer to the classics). The only thing I can remember is cheap paperbacks, comic books. That's principally where I started. My sister bought me my first book, *The Prince and the Pauper*. A ritual began with that book which I recall very clearly. The first thing was to set it up on the table and stare at it for a long time. Not because I was impressed with Mark Twain; it was just such a beautiful object. Then came the smelling of it. I think the smelling of books began with *The Prince and the Pauper,* because it was printed on particularly fine paper, unlike the Disney books I had gotten previous to that, which were printed on very poor paper and smelled poor. *The Prince and the Paper—Pauper—* smelled good and it also had a shiny cover, a laminated cover. I flipped over that. And it was very solid. I mean, it was bound very tightly. I remember trying to bite into it, which I don't imagine is what my sister intended when she

Miss Haviland: *Our questions to you, which are questions I think you have often answered for university and other groups, come as questions to you as an author and questions to you as an artist. Let's begin with the group of questions that have to do with you as an author. What part do you think fantasy should play in a child's life?*

Mr. Sendak: Well, fantasy is so all-pervasive in a child's life: I believe there's no part of our lives, our adult as well as child life, when we're not fantasizing, but we prefer to relegate fantasy to children, as though it were some tomfoolery only fit for the immature minds of the young. Children do live in fantasy *and* reality; they move back and forth very easily in a way that we no longer remember how to do. And in writing for children you just must assume they have this incredible flexibility, this cool sense of the logic of illogic, and that they can move with you very easily from one sphere to another without any problems. Fantasy is the core of all writing for children, as I think it is for the writing

of any book, for any creative act, perhaps for the act of living. Certainly it is crucial to my work. There are many kinds of fantasy and levels of fantasy and subtleties of fantasy—but that would be another question. There is probably no such thing as creativity without fantasy. My books don't come about by "ideas" or by thinking of a particular subject and exclaiming "Gee, that's a terrific idea, I'll put it down!" They never quite come to me that way; they well up. In the way a dream comes to us at night, feelings come to me, and then I must rush to put them down. But these fantasies have to be given physical form, so you build a house around them, and the house is what you call a story, and the painting of the house is the bookmaking. But essentially it's a dream, or it's a fantasy.

Miss Haviland: *Are you, yourself, remembering daydreams? And a belief in fantasy that came out of your own childhood?*

Mr. Sendak: I can't recall my childhood any more than most of us can. There are sequences and scenes I remember much as we all do. But I do seem to have the knack of recalling the emotional quality of childhood, so that in *Wild Things*—I can remember the feeling, when I was a child (I don't remember who the people were, but there were people who had come to our house, relatives perhaps) and I remember they looked extremely ugly to me. I remember this quite clearly, and that when people came and, with endearments they leaned over and said "Oh, I could eat you up!" I was very nervous because I really believed they probably could if they had a mind to. They had great big teeth, immense nostrils, and very sweaty foreheads. I often remember that vision and how it frightened me. There was one particular relative (I have some relatives in the audience, so I won't mention who it was) who did this to me, and it was really quite terrifying. Well, he is forever immortalized in *Wild Things*. *Wild Things* really is the anxiety and pleasure and immense problem of being a small child. And what do children do with themselves? They fantasize, they control fantasies or they don't control fantasies. It's not the recollection of my own particular childhood that I put down in books, but the feeling—like that particular feeling of fear of adults, who are totally unaware that what they say to children is sometimes taken quite literally. And that when they pinch your cheek out of affection, it hurts; and that, when they suggest they could "hug you to death," you back away—any number of such things.

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From Maurice Sendak Fantasy Sketches, *by Maurice Sendak. Copyright © 1970 by Maurice Sendak. Reproduced by permission of The Philip H. & A.S.W. Rosenbach Foundation.*

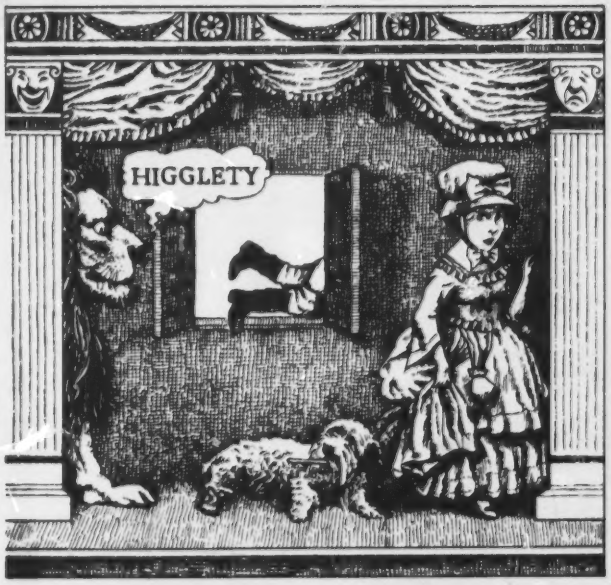
Miss Haviland: *It would be interesting to find out whether you can account for the fact that college students seem to enjoy* Where the Wild Things Are *and* Higglety Pigglety Pop! *as much as children do. The question is: whom do you see as your audience?*

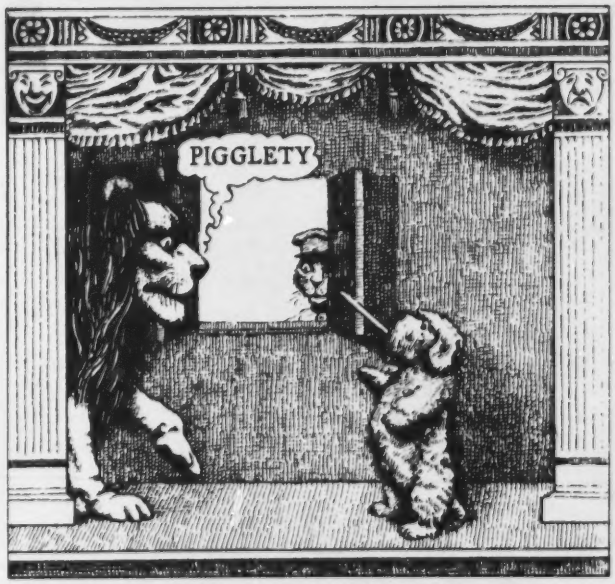
Mr. Sendak: Well, I suppose primarily children, but not really. Because I don't write for children specifically. I certainly am not conscious of sitting down and writing a book for children. I think it would be fatal if one did. So I write *books,* and I hope that they are books anybody can read. I mean, there was a time in history when books like *Alice in Wonderland* and the fairy tales of George Macdonald were read by everybody. They were not segregated for children. So I'd like to think I have a large audience, and if college students like my books, that's fine. I think young people tend to be freer about reading children's books. They don't think it's an odd thing to do particularly, if it's a good piece of fantasy, or even if it's just a good piece of fun. They aren't as hung up as perhaps we were about reading "children's" books. I know a lot of students think that I was "turned on" when I wrote some of my books. That is not just a guess, because I've had lots of inquiries about what I smoked during certain chapters of certain books. And that may be partly the interest that they have in such things. Writing fantasies is really being quite sufficiently high (without anything more than an Empirin).

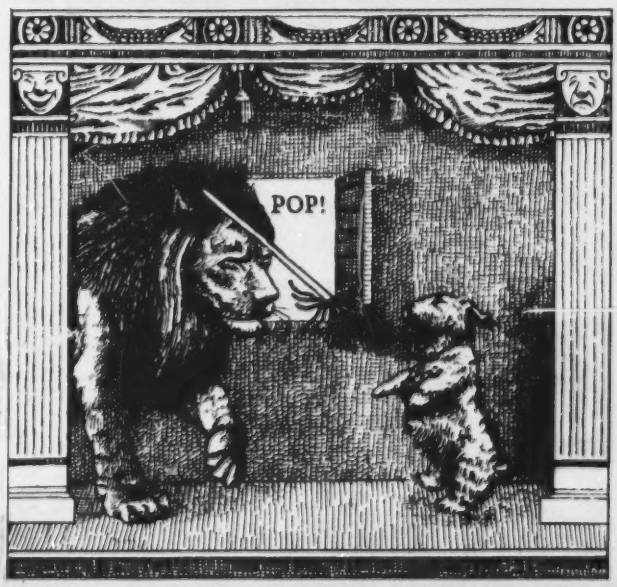
Miss Haviland: *Some other college students have asked how you, as a writer in this post-Freudian era, can resolve the problem of not consciously manipulating the unconscious.*

Mr. Sendak: [After a pause] Well, that's a problem. The Victorians were very fortunate. *Alice in Wonderland* is full of images and symbols, which are extremely beautiful and sometimes frightening. We know that Carroll had no Freud, and the book came pouring out of his unconscious, as happened with George Macdonald in *Princess and the Goblin.* These authors touched on some very primal images in quite a fascinating way. It is more difficult for us to do because we do know so much, we've read so much. I hope I don't consciously manipulate my material. I do not analyze my work; if something strikes me and I get excited, then I want it to be a book. If it begins to die as I work, then of course it's not a book. But I think I do get away occasionally with walking that fine unconscious line. The things I've written in which there are conscious unconscious things, are very—you can't put your finger on it, certainly children can put their fingers on it, they are *the* most critical audience in the world, they smell a rat instantly. You cannot fool them, you really cannot fool them. They're tough to work for. And if they sense—and they know adults do these books—if they sense for one minute that I was faking this, I would know it. Now, *Wild Things* walked a very fine line in this particular sense. It was ac-

From Higglety Pigglety Pop! Or There Must Be More To Life, *by Maurice Sendak. Harper & Row, Publishers. Copyright © 1967 by Maurice Sendak. Reproduced with permission.*







cepted by children largely, and that's the only proof I have that I've done it.

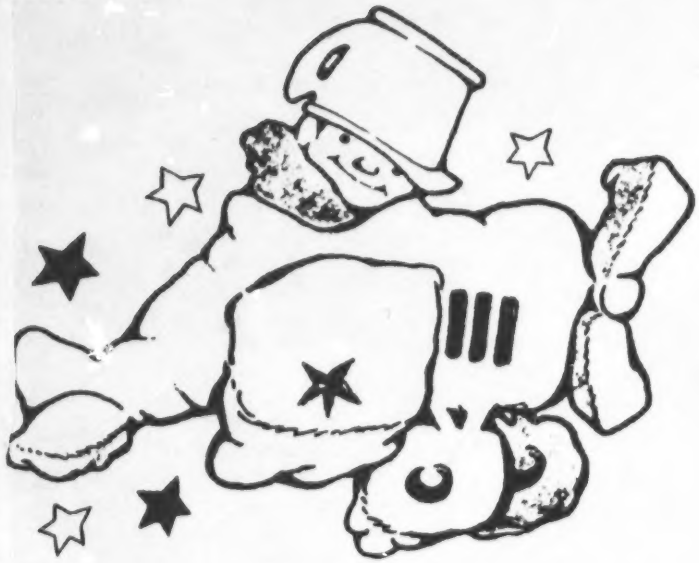
Miss Haviland: *Another college student has asked about the recurring symbol of something eating something, ingesting something, and then giving it out again. For instance in* Pierre *the lion eats Pierre and then gives him out; and in* As I Went Over the Water *a sea monster ingests a boat, then gives it out; in* Higglety Pigglety Pop! *Jenny eats a mop and then gives it out; and in* The Night Kitchen *Mickey is engulfed in dough and then springs out. Would you comment on this?*

Mr. Sendak: I don't know if it's safe to, but I began by telling you how much I liked to bite into my first books, and that is perhaps a clue to this subject. And, so far as I'm aware, I'm not an overeating person, but perhaps it is a hang-up from childhood. A pleasant one, I think. The business of eating is such an immensely important part of life for a child. Grimm's *Fairy Tales* is full of things being eaten and then disgorged. It's an image that constantly appeals to me; I love it. In *As I Went Over the Water,* the scene where the monster eats the boat and then regurgitates it is hilarious! I have the mind of a child, I think that's very funny. I will sit home and laugh myself sick over what I've done. Whether it appeals or makes sense to anyone else, I honestly don't know. It just seems right and occasionally children laugh too, so we laugh together.

Miss Haviland: *Some readers have been intrigued by the relationships between your characters Kenny, Martin, Max, and Mickey. Would you say in what way these children may be the same child, or in what ways they are not?*

Mr. Sendak: They are the same child, of course. Three of them have the initial "M." I don't think that's an accident, although I thought of that only while I was working on the last book. The first boy was Kenny, and he was named after a specific person. But a thread of meaning connects all the children. I can do a very rough analysis, I suppose. Kenny is a frustrated and introverted child. And Martin is fussy and sulking and not very brave. Max is tremendously brave but in a rage. And Mickey is extremely brave and very happy. I can follow that—I don't know if you can—but in the characters there is a kind of progress from holding back to coming forth which I'd like to think is me, not so much as a child or pretending that I'm a child but as a creative artist who also gets freer and freer with each book and opens up more and more.

Martin. From Very Far Away, *by Maurice Sendak. Harper & Brothers, Publishers. Copyright © 1957 by Maurice Sendak. Reproduced with permission.*



Mickey. From In the Night Kitchen, *by Maurice Sendak. Harper & Row, Publishers. Copyright © 1970 by Maurice Sendak. Reproduced with permission.*

Max. From Where the Wild Things Are, *by Maurice Sendak. Harper & Row, Publishers. Copyright © 1963 by Maurice Sendak. Reproduced with permission.*

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From In the Night Kitchen, *by Maurice Sendak. Harper & Row, Publishers. Copyright © 1970 by Maurice Sendak. Reproduced with permission.*

Miss Haviland: *Many persons right now are asking what inspired you to produce this new book,* In the Night Kitchen?

Mr. Sendak: Well, that is a difficult question. It comes out of a lot of things, and they are very hard to describe, because they are not so clear to me. There are a few clues. When I was a child there was an advertisement which I remember very clearly. It was for the Sunshine Bakers. And the advertisement read "We Bake While You Sleep!" It seemed to me the most sadistic thing in the world, because all I wanted to do was stay up and watch. And it seemed so absurdly cruel and arbitrary for them to do it while I slept. And also for them to think I would think that was terrific stuff on their part, you know, and would eat their product on top of that. It bothered me a good deal, and I remember I used to save the coupons showing the three fat little Sunshine bakers going off to this magic place, wherever it was, at night to have their fun, while I had to go to bed. This book was a sort of vendetta book to get back at them and to say that I am now old enough to stay up at night and know what is happening in the Night Kitchen! The other clue is a rather odd fantasy of mine when I was a child. I lived in Brooklyn and to travel to Manhattan was a big deal, even though it was so close. I couldn't go by myself, and I counted a good deal on my elder sister. She took us—my brother and myself—to Radio City Music Hall, or the Roxy, or some such place. Now, the point of going to New York was that you *ate* in New York. Now we get back to eating again. Somehow to me New York represented eating. And eating in a very fashionable, elegant, superlatively mysterious place like Longchamps. You got dressed up, and you went uptown, and it was night when you got there, and there were lots of windows blinking, and you went straight to a place to eat. It was one of the most exciting things of my childhood, to do this. Cross the bridge, and see the city approaching, and get there, and have your dinner, and then go to a movie, and come home. So, again, *In the Night Kitchen* is a kind of homage to New York City, the city I loved so much and still love. It had a special quality for me as a child. It also is homage to the things that really affected me esthetically. I did not get to museums, I did not see art books. I was really quite rough in the sense of what was going on artistically. *Fantasia* was perhaps the most esthetic experience of my childhood, and that's a very dubious experience. But mainly there were the comic books and there was Walt Disney, and, more than anything else, there were the movies and radio, especially the movies. The early films, such as the Gold Digger movies and *King Kong* and other monster films, were the stuff that my books are composed of now. I am surprised, and this is really unconscious—I was looking at *Where the Wild Things Are* not too long ago with a friend, who had found something which amused her a good deal. She is a film collector, and she opened to one page of the book, where one of the wild things is leaning out of the cave. And then she held alongside it a still from *King Kong,* and it was, literally, a copy. But I had not seen the still, of course; I could not have remembered the sequence. Obviously, it had impressed itself on my brain, and there it was: I mean, exactly the proportions of cave to cliff, and proportions of monster coming out of cave. It was really quite extraordinary, the effect the films did have on me.

It was only much later, when I was a practicing illustrator and writer, that I got to know the classic children's books and read them. I did not know them as a child; I did not know pictures or paintings or writing when I was growing up. Brooklyn was a more or less civilized place, let me assure you, but this particular thing didn't get to me until quite late. And I think it's reflected in my work. I am what is commonly referred to as a late bloomer. I am happy for that.

Miss Haviland: *That brings us to the question of whom you believe to be some of the great writers for children? You have made some allusions already, but would you enlarge on that?*

Mr. Sendak: George Macdonald I think of as probably the greatest of the Victorian writers for children. It's the combination of planes, levels, that he worked on. George Macdonald can tell a conventional fairy tale; it has all the form that a fairy tale must have. At the same time, he manages to inundate the story with a kind of dream-magic, or unconscious power. *The Princess and the Goblin:* Irene's travels through the cave with the goblins are so strange, they can only come out of the deepest dream stuff. The fact that he can weave both of these things together is exactly what I love so much in his work, and what I try to emulate. And he is a model; he is someone I try to copy in many ways. There are other writers, like Charles Dickens, who has precisely this quality of the urgency of childhood. The peculiar charm of being in a room in a Dickens novel, where the furniture is alive, the fire is alive, where saucepans are alive, where chairs move, where every inanimate object has a personality. This is that particularly vivid quality that children have, of endowing everything with life. And Dickens sees and hears as children do. He has a marvelous ear for what's going on socially and politically, and on one level he's telling you a straightforward story. But underneath there is the intensity of the little boy staring out at everything and looking, and examining, and watching, and feeling intensely, and suffering immensely, which is what I think makes Dickens a superb writer. The same is true of George Macdonald. Another favorite writer is Henry James. I first became enthusiastic over Henry James when I read some of the earlier novels about young children. His incredible power of putting himself in the position of young children, viewing the adult world; and his uncanny sense of how difficult and painful it is to be a child. And even harder to be an adolescent. Now, these are people who write from their child sources, their dream sources. They don't forget them. William Blake is my favorite—and, of course, *The Songs of Innocence* and *The Songs of Experience* tell you all about this: what it is to be a child—not childish, but a child inside your adult self—and how much better a person you are for being such. So that my favorite writers are never writers who have written books specifically for children. I don't believe in that kind of writing. I don't believe in people who consciously write for children. The great ones have always just written books. And there are many more, but I can't think of them now.

Illustration by Maurice Sendak from The Light Princess, *by George MacDonald. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Illustration © 1969 by Maurice Sendak. Reproduced with permission.*

Miss Haviland: *Now let's take a group of questions set to you as an artist. In a photo bulletin issued by our State Department, a comment is made that critics credit—and I'm quoting now—"a hidden little boy, Maurice, between four and eight, with the dreamlike quality of the pictures created by Sendak the man." And further in this piece, the journalist quoted you as saying that your new book,* In the Night Kitchen, *is your idea of what books looked like to you as a four-year-old. Would you elaborate on this quotation?*

Mr. Sendak: Well, I think I did that already. I mean, the city as I felt it as a child. It also was an attempt to capture the look of the books that meant so much to me in the thirties and the early forties—they were not glamorous, "artistic" books; they were very cheap, full-color books that, up to a short time ago, I thought were contemptible. But for some odd reason, my old love for them has returned. My taste in English graphics and German fairy tales came much later, and it really is, I think, on my part at least an honest attempt to get back to those things that did mean an awful lot to me as a child. They weren't fancy, they were good, and *In the Night Kitchen* was an attempt to make a beautiful book that at the same time still suggested those early inexpensive books that were read by most children I knew.

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Miss Haviland: *One librarian recalls hearing you speak in the 1950's, a time between the publishing of your illustrations for* A Hole Is To Dig *and of those for* Little Bear, *when you said that your roots go back to Caldecott. And this past April, when you accepted the Hans Christian Andersen International Medal, you named another string of artists whom you credit with stimulating you. I remember you mentioned William Blake, whom you've already spoken of here, George Cruikshank and Boutet de Monvel, Wilhelm Busch, Heinrich Hoffmann.*

Mr. Sendak: That's right.

Miss Haviland: *Could you talk about the specific elements that you think you find there that are particulariy relevant to the children's book illustrator?*

Mr. Sendak: I hated school and my own particular way was to learn by myself. Many of the artists who influenced me were illustrators I accidentally came upon. I knew the Grimm's *Fairy Tales* illustrated by George Cruikshank, and I just went after everything I could put my hands on that was illustrated by Cruikshank and copied his style. Quite as simply as that. I wanted to crosshatch the way he did. Then I found Wilhelm Busch and I was off again. But happily Wilhelm Busch also crosshatched, so the Cruikshank crosshatching wasn't entirely wasted. And so an artist grows. I leaned very heavily on these people. I developed taste from these illustrators. Boutet de Monvel, the French illustrator, who is still not terribly well known (which is a great surprise to me), illustrated in the twenties, or earlier perhaps—had the most glorious sense of design and refinement of style. His pictures are so beautifully felt and they are supremely elegant as only French illustration can be. They are very clear, very transparent, extremely fine. At the same time, they can be very tragic. There are things in his drawings, which perhaps now would even seem too strong for children—although at one point, they did not. There is a perfect example of his method in one of his illustrations for the *Fables* of La Fontaine—"The Wolf and the Lamb." They are a series of drawings, very much like a comic strip. It's like a ballet. The little lamb moves toward the stream and begins to drink, and the ferocious wolf appears and says: "What are you doing here? This is my water!" Of course, he's rationalizing the whole thing, he's going to eat the lamb up anyway, but he's putting on this big act about it being his water. Now, the lamb knows that there's no chance for escape, and while the wolf is bristling—and in each drawing his chest gets puffier and his fangs get fangier, and his eyes are blazing, and he looks horrendous—now, in proportion to him, growing larger on the page, the lamb dwindles. It has immediately accepted its fate, it can't outrun the wolf, it doesn't even listen to the words of the wolf, this is all beside the point: it is going to die, and it prepares itself for death. And while the wolf goes through this inane harangue, the lamb folds itself in preparation for its death. It leans down, it puts its head to one side, it curls up very gently, and its final gesture is to lay its head down on the ground. And at that moment the wolf pounces and destroys the lamb. It is one of the most beautiful sequences I've ever seen and one of the most honest in a children's book. There's no pretense of the lamb escaping, or of there being a happy ending—this is the way it is, it does happen this way sometimes, that's what de Monvel is saying. And this is what I believe children appreciate. People rage against the Grimm's fairy tales, forgetting that originally the brothers Grimm had—I'm going off the track a little bit—assembled the tales not for children but for historical and philological reasons. They were afraid their past was being lost in all the upheavals of that period, and the tales were put out as a scholarly edition of peasant tales not to be forgotten as part of the heritage of their homeland. Well, lo and behold, children began to read them. And the second edition was called *The Household Tales* because children were devouring the books—not literally—I'm going to be so conscious of that from here on. The whole point I'm making, although I have forgotten the point frankly, is that those illustrators and writers that attracted me were the ones who did not seem at all to be hung up by the fact that their audiences were small people. They were telling the truth, just the way it was. This could be done if it were esthetically beautiful, if it were well written—simply, if it were a work of art, then it was fine. Now *Der Struwwelpeter* was one of the books that I loved very much—graphically,

it is one of the most beautiful books in the world. One might complain about the cutting off of fingers, and the choking to death, and being burned alive, and might well have a case there—but, esthetically, for an artist growing up it was a good book to look at and a lot of my early books were affected strongly by the German illustrators. When I came to picture books, it was Randolph Caldecott who really did put me where I wanted to be. Caldecott is an illustrator, he is a songwriter, he is a choreographer, he is a stage manager, he is a decorator, he is a theater person; he's superb, simply. And he can take four lines of verse that have very little meaning in themselves and stretch them into a book that has tremendous meaning—not overloaded, no sentimentality in it. Everybody meets with a bad ending in *Froggie Went A-Courting*. Froggie gets eaten at the end by a duck, which is very sad, and the story usually ends on that note. But in Caldecott's version, he introduces, oddly enough, a human family. They observe the tragedy much as a Greek chorus might—one can almost hear their comments. In the last picture, we see Froggie's hat going downstream, all that remains of him. And standing on the bank are mother, father, and child—and it's startling for a moment until you realize what he's done: the little girl is clutching the mother's long Victorian skirt. And it's as though she's just been told the story, she's very upset, obviously. There are no words; I'm just inventing what I think this means—Froggie is dead, it alarms her, and for support she's hanging on to her mother's skirt. Her mother has a very quiet, resigned expression on her face. She's very gently pointing with her parasol toward the stream as the hat moves away, and the father is looking very sad. They're both expressing to the child, "Yes, it is very sad, but this does happen—that is the way the story ended, it can't be helped. But you have us. Hold on, everything is all right." And this is impressive in a simple rhyming book for children; it's extremely beautiful. It's full of fun, it's full of beautiful drawings, and it's full of truth. And I think Caldecott did it best, much better than anyone else who ever lived.

Miss Haviland: *One critic, at the last Biennale of Illustration at Bratislava, said: "There is no fundamental difference between illustrations for children and those for adults." Would you comment on that?*

Mr. Sendak: I don't agree at all, of course. I intensely do not believe in illustrations for adults. For preschool children who cannot read, pictures are extremely valuable. But even children who do read move in a very different world. As for adults, I personally find it offensive to read, I will *not* read, a novel that is illustrated. I always use this example, and many people here who know me have heard me carry on about this particular one, the case of *Anna Karenina:* the audacity of any illustrator who would draw Anna after Tolstoy has described her in the best way possible! Now, everyone who's read the book knows exactly what she looks like, or what he wants her to look like. Tolstoy is superb. And then to get an artist so asinine as to think he's going to draw Anna! Or Melville: it's incredible. People illustrate *Moby-Dick*. It's an insane thing to do, in my estimation. There is every difference in the world between illustrations for adults and illustrations for children. I don't know why there *are* illustrations for adults. They make no sense to me at all.

Miss Haviland: *Out of that same Biennale of Illustration, where you represented the United States as our juror, there was considerable disagreement, I recall disagreement in theory, on the importance of kinds of art as illustrations. You were there, could you bring this into the picture?*

Mr. Sendak: Well, I'm not sure I know exactly what you mean, but as I recall there was a European point of view as to what illustrations accomplish in a children's book, as opposed to what we believe is the function of illustration. I didn't know such a difference of opinion existed until we were in Czechoslovakia. And it was quite extraordinary. Partly, perhaps, because there is a dearth of original writing, they tend more often to reillustrate their classic and fairy tales, and the illustrations take on a dominance and importance which I, as an illustrator, do not approve of. The books often become showcases for artists. I mean, you turn pages and there are extremely beautiful illustrations, but so far as

I can see they could be taken out of one book and put into another. Whereas here, we are very much involved in making the illustrations work in a very specific way inside a book. Now, a picture is there, not because there should be a picture there; there is a purpose for a picture—we are embellishing, or we are enlarging, or we are involving ourselves in some very deep way with the writer of the book, so that the book (when it is finally illustrated) means more than it did when it was just written. Which is not to say we are making the words more important; we are perhaps opening up the words in a way that children at first did not see was possible. In the United States we work to bring pictures and words together to achieve a wholeness in the book, which I was very surprised to find is not at all important in many European countries. It's not a matter of right or wrong, it's just that it is so different! There it was so much a matter of graphics, of beauty of picture; here graphic acrobatics are less important.

Miss Haviland: *One critic has asked why you changed from the "fine engraved style" of* Higglety Pigglety Pop! *back to what this person calls the "fat style" of your earlier work?*

Mr. Sendak: Umm, "fat style." Well, I think the only way to answer that is to discuss the business of style. Style, to me, is purely a means to an end, and the more styles you have, the better. One should be able to junk a style very quickly. I think one of the worst things that can happen in some of the training schools for young men and women who are going to be illustrators is the tremendous focusing on "style," on preparation for coming out into the world and meeting the great, horned monsters, book editors. And how to take them on. And style seems to be one of the things. It's a great mistake. To get trapped in a style is to lose all flexibility. And I have worked very hard not to get trapped in that way. Now, I think my work looks like me, generally speaking; over a series of books, you can tell I've done them (much as I may regret many of them). I worked up a very elaborate pen and ink style in *Higglety,* which is very finely crosshatched. But I can abandon that for a magic marker, as I did in *Night Kitchen,* and just go back to very simple, outlined, broad drawings with flat, or flatter, colors. Each book obviously demands an individual stylistic approach. If you have one style, then you're going to do the same book over and over, which is, of course, pretty dull. Lots of styles permit you to walk in and out of all kinds of books. It is a great bore worrying about style. So, my point is to have a fine style, a fat style, a fairly slim style, and an extremely stout style.

Miss Haviland: *This question comes to you as both an artist and an author. Do you think of your books first in words or in pictures?*

Mr. Sendak: In words. In fact, I don't think of the pictures at all. It's a very strange, schizophrenic sort of thing; I've thought of that very often. Sometimes after I've written something I find that there are things in my story that I don't draw well. And if it were any other person's book, I'd consider not doing it. But I've written it and I'm stuck with it, which is proof to me that I have not (at least consciously) been seduced by the tale's graphic potential. I don't think in terms of pictures at all; I find it's much more interesting and difficult to write, and illustration now becomes secondary in my life. So far as I'm aware, I think strictly in terms of words. And then when it's finished, it is almost a surprise as to "How'm I going to draw *that?*" or "Why did I do that?" I'm stuck with an airplane, or I'm stuck with a building. If I'm stuck with an automobile, I'm ready to blow my brains out.

Miss Haviland: *Some artists feel that creating a work is a very separate experience and vastly more satisfying than what happens when the work goes out into the world. How do you evaluate the private experience as compared with the public experience?*

Mr. Sendak: Well, there really is no comparison. The private experience is extraordinary, because it's all yours, nobody knows about it, nobody's going to find out about it, and you have it all to yourself for as long as it takes you to

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finish the book. *In the Night Kitchen* took two years of concentrated work. *The Wild Things* took about the same length of time, maybe a little less. During that time you are completely absorbed in this dream, this fantasy, whatever it is. The pleasure you get is extraordinary. You live in a very strange world, really quite divorced from this dull, real world. When I'm working on a book, I see very few people, do very few things but think about my book, dream about my book, love it, hate it, pull hairs out of my head; and the only time I speak to people is when I want to complain about it. And then it's over, and then it's finished, and the great shock comes when it is printed! And that's much like giving birth, and always a difficult birth. A book being printed is a major topic in itself; it is a very difficult thing to see through. What was once very dreamlike and transparent and what you thought was a magic moment has now become a real thing in a printing press, and it's going through a big machine, and it looks lousy, and it has to be done all over again. And so gradually your particular transparent little dream is becoming more real, and more terrible every moment. And then finally it is a book. And you become extremely depressed, because you realize that what was so superb and different is really just another book! How strange. It looks like all the other things you've done. And then it goes out into the world, and your child, who was so private and who was living with you for two years, now is everybody's child. Some people knock him on the head, some kick him in the rump, and others like him very much. It's a totally different experience. It takes me a long time to shift gears. I am now in the process. It's only a few weeks since the book came out, and I don't know quite yet how to adjust to the fact that people are looking at it, and criticizing it.

Miss Haviland: *Looking at the publishing world, we can see a very big question: Do you think that children's book publishing is significantly different today than it was when you began in the early fifties? And, if you do, in what respect do you see this?*

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Mr. Sendak: Well, yes, of course, it is very different than when I began in the early fifties. For one thing, the world seemed quieter then, and there was more opportunity to do experimental kinds of books. More important, there was time for young people to grow quietly. If you're an artist, you really need the time to grow quietly and not feel competitive or pushed. It was that way in the early fifties. One could develop gradually. Now, of course, it is much more competitive, and we do many more books but, alas, not many more great books. Something is lost. There is a rush, we are flooded with books, books come pouring out of the publishing meat grinder. And, the quality has dropped severely. We may be able to print a book better, but intrinsically the book, perhaps, is not better than it was. We have a backlist of books, superb books, by Margaret Wise Brown, by Ruth Krauss, by lots of people. I'd much rather we just took a year off, a moratorium: no more books. For a year, maybe two—just stop publishing. And get those old books back, let the children see them! Books don't go out of fashion with children; they only go out of fashion with adults. So that kids are deprived of works of art which are no longer around simply because new ones keep coming out. Every Christmas we are inundated with new books, and it's the inundation which I really find quite depressing.

Miss Haviland: *Would you generalize in any way on what has been happening in other countries as you have traveled abroad and looked at picture books?*

Mr. Sendak: Since I've generalized all this time, I could go a little further. There was a great moment in the middle fifties when, suddenly, the foreign books came to America. Books from Switzerland, the Hans Fischer books and the Carigiet books. We'd never seen them; it was a revolution in American bookmaking. We suddenly began to look very European. It was the best thing that could have happened to us, we *looked* terrific! But, of course, Europeans were then doing the

Illustration by Maurice Sendak from A Hole Is To Dig, *by Ruth Krauss. Harper & Brothers. Illustration copyright 1952 by Maurice Sendak. Reproduced with permission.*

most superb books. England invented the children's book as we know it. And now, in the sixties and seventies, certainly America is leading the world in the manufacture of children's books. It's disappointing, I find, going to Europe (with the exception of England and Switzerland) and finding so few contemporary children's books. I don't know if you found this to be true, but I did. In France there is *Babar* and the great old ones, but there are very few new ones. There *are* new ones, of course, but none that we get to see and none that seemingly even French people or Italians get to see—it seems they have dropped back considerably. I could be wrong. In my travels I've discussed this matter with illustrators and editors—and this is certainly the impression I've gotten.

Miss Haviland: *Is there any point that you would like to make, aside from the questions that have been brought up to you before and which you've answered again tonight?*

Mr. Sendak: I love my work very much, it means everything to me. I would like to see a time when children's books were not segregated from adult books, a time when people didn't think of children's books as a minor art form, a little Peterpanville, a cutesy-darling place where you could Have Fun, Laugh Your Head Off. I know so many adult writers whom I would happily chop into pieces, who say, "Well, I think I'll take a moment and sit down and knock off a kiddy book! It looks like so much fun, it's obviously easy—." And, of course, they write a lousy book. You hope they will and they do! It would be so much better if everyone felt that children's books are for everybody, that we simply write books, that we are a community of writers and artists, that we are all seriously involved in the business of writing. And if everyone felt that writing for children is a serious business, perhaps even more serious that a lot of other forms of writing, and if, when such books are reviewed and discussed, they were discussed on this serious level, and that we would be taken seriously as artists. I would like to do away with the division into age categories of children over here and adults over there, which is confusing to me and I think probably confusing to children. It's very confusing to many people who don't even know how to buy a children's book. I think if I have any particular hope it is this: that we all should simply be artists and just write books and stop pretending that there is such a thing as being able to sit down and write a book for a child: it is quite impossible. One simply writes books.

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